

help the hurt, save the small by Lorata

Category: Dragon Age, Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Drama

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-08-23 16:00:13

Updated: 2017-08-23 16:00:13

Packaged: 2019-12-12 03:35:54

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 4,578

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A strange rift in Skyhold brings Cole somewhere new. The former Ghost of the White Spire finds himself stalking new halls, searching for the girl whose pain tore a hole in the fabric of the world. (In which Cole saves Eleven, or maybe helps her save herself.)

help the hurt, save the small

Cole moves through the shadows, watching, listening, looking for the pain. Tears drying on a pillow, damp linen and twisted sheets, a letter crumpled by fingers clenched and clutching, parchment now a heap of ashes beneath a guttering candle. Words no longer ink but memory scream and sear the mind in silent song: *why aren't you coming home, the war is over, give up this nonsense, do you want to shame us all, Gustav is waiting for you but he won't wait forever.*

He bends, brushes blond curls from the soldier's forehead. Her sword glitters in the candlelight, the blade polished bright and sharp with a loving hand. She loves it more than she loves herself. "They love the daughter in the portraits," he tells her. He sees the paintings, the canvas curling with the weight of so much pigment, thick brushstrokes heavy with turpentine and expectation. The little girl drowning in velvet and satin who made bridles out of ribbons and pretended to race horses with her feet. "You don't have to be what they tried to make you."

The dreams settle, smooth and still like the summer sea, no more monsters lurking in the deep. The memory of Mother, her face like carved ice with her mouth pinched tight, the lines across her forehead in frowning furrows, fades away like ripples in the water.

"Also Sadie likes you," Cole adds as an afterthought, pausing in the doorway on his way out. "She doesn't like the honeycakes. They're too sweet, but she liked the way you smiled when you offered her one that time in the rain. Only you kept bringing them, and she still likes your smile but she doesn't like the honeycakes. You should kiss her instead."

He makes his rounds, soothes the tangled hurts, finds the knots of pain and tugs them free like strands of spider silk. When all of Skyhold sleeps, the last of the late-night pain chased away, Cole sits on the ramparts and lets his legs dangle. Watches the moonlight bathe the mountains, how the soft glow glitters on the castle walls and limns each leaf on every tree, pale, pure like a gentle sigh. He drums one foot against the wall in time with the silent heartbeat of the stronghold, the pulse of life and connection that keeps him here

even with Corypheus long dead.

And then —

Deep within Skyhold something shifts, takes the dark and tears it. Not ripping, rending, roaring like the Breach, but softer, subtler, those first muddled moments of confusion after waking. Cole slips back from the wall, follows the shape of the wrongness through the corridors, tastes it in the air like sour wine, like the scent of rotting fruit, one of Sera's pranks unnoticed and forgotten until too late. In these moments in Varric's books the characters find their hearts in their throats. He always wonders how they got there. Cole's heart stays in place; he simply finds himself watchful, waiting, daggers dancing danger in his hands, stalking silent on the stairs.

It's not so much a rift as a *calling*.

Or — no, that's not right. It is a rift, the light rippling and roving in the middle of the air, but it's different, wrong somehow. No crystals floating in the air, no spikes of fade lightning spitting demons. No Fade energy at all. Cole feels a tug with the other rifts, faint, fading, feeling, a finger on his chest, a whisper saying *come home*. There are whispers here but not like that, not like home. This is strange, like waving at a mirror and seeing the wrong hand wave back.

The images through the rift are strange, too. Not the Fade, not the floating rocks and cliffs and the distant city. Cole sees glimpses of dark corridors and rooms with blank, forbidding walls, stern pale faces and stark white uniforms. But they're not what spikes the unease through him, leaves it to spread like blood from a fresh wound over clean white bandages.

Light leaks from the rift, chasing the shadows into the corners of the room, but that's not all. The longer Cole stands in front of it the more he hears it, the more it washes over him until he gasps. It slaps at him in full-body waves like the unexpected surf at the Storm Coast that soaked his leathers to his skin and made Varric laugh, only not like that at all. It's dizziness and drowning all at once, roaring raging rushing until Cole collapses to his knees, gasping and choking with eyes on fire. He checks his nose and ears for blood, instead finds cheeks wet with tears.

Pain.

Pain brought Compassion to that forgotten cell in the White Spire all those years ago. Pain gave him purpose, bound him to flesh and form. Pain turned compassion into the twist of a dagger and the gurgle of airways filling with blood in the darkness. Now pain spills from the rift like water poured into a container much too small. Cole imagines the room filling with it, imagines his boots squelching, his clothes soaking, imagines trying — he flounders feebly, falters, failing — to find the stopper and scoop it back.

The rift didn't call him here. The pain did. Someone is hurting, and their pain tore a hole in the fabric of the world.

Cole is afraid.

Varric would tell him not to go. Cole isn't really Cole, not anymore. The name brings comfort to his friends and so he keeps it like a much-loved jacket now outgrown, but Varric still wishes, still hopes. Still calls him "kid". Varric would tell him this is not his fight, but Varric stayed when the Breach tore the sky because he couldn't live with himself if he left. The Inquisitor would want to come with him, but this is not the Fade, this is something else, something new, and the Inquisitor is important. Not only to the Inquisition, to Thedas, but to their companions. Everything ties back to them like a series of scarlet ribbons loped around their wrists.

If Cole disappears, no one will remember. Nothing will be lost.

(Solas would understand. Solas isn't here.)

The rift pulses. The pain rises, surges with a scream that scrapes the inside of his skull like an old blade, ragged and rusting. Cole pushes himself to his feet, staggers against the sudden onslaught — not just pain but *memory*, ripples of the first boy in the tower, the one he made himself forget, scrabbling at the edges of his mind — and runs into the rift.

He crosses the boundary. Everything spins — he falls as the ground disappears and the world gives a sickening lurch — and then he's back, his heart like war drums in his chest.

The world is empty. He feels it as soon as he's through, the old song faint and faraway through the opening in the rift. There is no magic here, no spirits, no Fade. Cole is a strange thing, a stranger, he stands out stark and wrong and burning in this sad, empty world that sings no songs. He wonders if this is how it feels to be a dwarf, if this is why Varric always feels so sad underneath the jokes and laughter.

The pain is louder here, magnified like shouting in a cavern where the walls shout back. Cole leans against the smooth grey wall and closes his eyes against the lights — bright, buzzing, blazing, the lights like shouting too, screaming in his eyes, too bright for torchlight, brighter still than veilfire, like staring at the sun but angry. What is this place?

It reminds him of the Spire. Men walk the corridors, calm and and silent, wearing authority like armour even if these ones don't carry swords. He catches their thoughts and hears the same cool logic wreathed in casual disdain and disregard (*when will she stop crying, children are weak, this wouldn't happen if she'd follow instructions*) and the anger hits Cole like one of the Iron Bull's famous charging tackles.

This he remembers, yes he does, even if he is no longer Cole. Even if these men do not use the word *Templars*. Men like this are the same wherever they go. Callous, cool, bored with human frailties like hunger or gnawing bellies, disgusted by the need to sleep or cry or feel. Convinced that they and only they deserve the basic courtesies of life, that anything else stands in the way of progress.

And underneath it all the pain. It paints the walls, runs along the floors like floodwater. Cole tries to find the words that form the pain and fails, finds nothing but a primal scream he can't begin to trace. Instead he listens to the men again, and over and over he finds the same words: *child, kid, girl*, along with *specimen, control, experiment*.

He thinks of Seeker Lambert, the way his mind had been a steel cage of certainty that housed a slick, black pool of evil with no room for questions. How he'd known that mages were not human, that they should be used and discarded and exterminated like vermin. These men do not hear the pain or see a child. They see a tool that is not working, a sword they cannot replace and so must be beaten back into shape before it can be used again.

The anger finds Cole again, whispers in his ear like a long-lost lover. He breathes and finds his daggers already in his hands.

Two men approach, discussing things in bored tones using words he doesn't understand, oblivious to the pain that stains the air and sits heavy and stinking on Cole's tongue. Cole grips his daggers, waits for them to pass him by, already marking where to strike — but wait, no, not yet. They can't see him but they will when they die, and this isn't the Spire. He can't melt into the darkness, can't lose himself in the maze of tunnels beneath the dungeons. He has to find her, help her, save her. Revenge comes later.

Cole follows the pain. It's hard, the pain is everywhere, bleeding into the walls, left behind in empty rooms like corpses rotting through the floorboards. But finally something else filters through, like the first ringing clash of swords above the distant rumbling roar of battle: the sound of fists, connecting against an unforgiving surface, and muffled, aching screams. Not memory, not an echo but real, and it's not that the men can't hear it, it's that they *don't*.

Cole curls the sounds around the pain, braids them together and winds them around his wrist so he doesn't lose the thread. He follows them like the story Dorian told him once of the man who defeated the maze with a loop of string. Each time the men pass him in the corridor Cole fades back, lets himself become nothing, a floating spirit, free and fleeting, fragmented, and they keep on walking.

He tracks the pain to a door. The sounds have stopped now, the frantic pounding and the shouting, no more screams of *no* and *please* and *papa* (a word that fills Cole with a strange sense of emptiness, part of the old Cole that he made himself forget because he couldn't take the hurt), but the pain still lingers. It's leaking now, flickering like a candle in an empty cavern, and despair licks at the edges in a way that makes Cole's throat clench. But there is no magic here, no demons, and he is in control.

This world is not his own, and it fights him. The door doesn't want to let him through, and it doesn't answer when he asks. And so Cole closes his eyes, and he ignores the doors and the walls and the too-bright lights that flicker overhead and the too-clean smell that burns inside his nostrils. He focuses on the pain, feels it bright and burning

like the trail behind a shooting star, lets it call to him, find him, sink its claws into him and *pull*.

The world shivers, and he's inside.

The girl sits hunched in the corner, knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs, forehead pressed against her thighs. Her limbs are scrawny where they poke out from beneath the thin, dotted gown, and bruises ring her wrists and forearms in patterns of five. Cole makes a slow circle, notes the knobs of her spine, the hair like bristles of a brush. He hears Varric's voice in his head, joking, a jest to mask the jolt of horror: *Someone needs to give this kid a sandwich.*

She looks cold, and hungry, and frightened, but these are things Cole has learned from people. These, as Vivienne would say while narrowing her eyes and giving him that thin-lipped stare, are *social cues*. Cole crouches down, and the world presses against him with his emptiness and its silence, touching, tugging, trying to make him solid, but he shuts it out and listens.

He waits for the words to say the song of sickness in her heart, but the words are scarce, scattered, few and far between like leaves forgotten on the stones of a well-swept courtyard. Cole frowns, focuses, forges on ahead. He looks for a name: names are easy, names are the foundation of the castle of the self, whether they're names that burn like acid or names like armour that weighs too much and rubs rashes on the skin, names like honey on the tongue and names that glow with pride like the rising sun.

No words. No names. Only a number, and so much pain it chokes.

It's a start.

"My friend is like you," Cole says.

The girl looks up, red-rimmed eyes wide and staring. She curls her fingers into fists atop her knees. Maybe Cole should have tried to hide the knives, but it's too late now. He's never been as good with children. They see more, forget less. This girl doesn't look like she forgets much of anything at all. Cole keeps himself back for now,

afraid of what he'll find if he looks too close.

"They call you Eleven, don't they?" Cole continues. The girl's face doesn't move much, a quick flicker of her eyes, her brows knitting together before she smooths her expression back to neutral, but now he hears words: not hers but others, an echo of a dozen different men, *Eleven, Eleven look at me, Eleven sit down, listen to instructions Eleven, I'm very disappointed in you Eleven.* "My friend, they called him by a number too. They did it so he wouldn't think of himself as people. So they didn't have to treat him like one."

She curls in a little, twists her fingers in her gown. Her suspicion seeps into the space between them, like the scent of flowers planted in a graveyard and watered with fresh blood. Cole reaches out his hand a little but doesn't try to touch her, senses the tension like a line drawn taut. "I know you're hurting," he says. "I heard your pain. I came to help."

This time Cole hears a word, his word, rolling back and forth in her mind as she tries it out, like the first time he tested a dagger's weight. Finally she wets her lips and meets his gaze. "Help?"

"Yes," Cole says. Now he falters, because the question in her mind burns bright and clear. It's not hesitation that made her ask. A child's curiosity, the drive for understanding underneath the hurt. But how to explain *help*? He has to try. "It means — I want to make things better. To stop the hurt and make things right again."

The frown deepens. Cole feels himself slipping, the ground shifting like soft sand even as the edges of the world harden around him. Is the rift still there? Will he be able to get back? He fights the urge to flee, fly, fade away, before it's too late.

This is important, Cole reminds himself. He is Compassion, and she is hurting. She needs him. Try again.

He closes his eyes and lets his mind brush hers.

Bruises on her skin like brands from hands that grip too hard. Her mind shows him a table, chairs with straps that hold her feet in place, hands that hold her down and press something long and thin into her

spine. Blood dripping from her nose, thick and warm and sticky, straps around her skull as pain spikes through her temples and a voice says *not yet, keep going, one more time*. A cat she doesn't want to kill. A man she does. Headaches drilling, drilling, drilling through her skull, the nightmares of the faceless monster that stalks her sleep.

Cole yanks himself free, feels the ghost of the old anger growing in his chest. He's forgotten the old Cole, washed away the memories of everything that happened before he became the Ghost of the Spire, but he remembers stalking the dungeons, listening for the pain that curled so deep it curdled into despair.

I know it hurts, he used to say as he drew the knife. *I can make it stop*.

"I know they hurt you," Cole says now. "I can stop them, if you want me to."

Her head snaps up. "Help," she says. She snaps off the word like a wolf tears meat from bone. "Help me stop them." She pushes herself to her feet, stands, swaying, hands bunched into fists. "Help me *hurt them*."

Cole reaches back, slides his daggers from their sheaths. Her eyes glint as she takes them in, reaches one hand toward the curved, wicked blades with a hunger that digs deep. The others wouldn't like it. (*The others aren't here.*)

"Yes," Cole says. "I can do that."

The first man falls in a spray of blood, his throat a slitted smile, slashed open by a swing of Cole's dagger. He drops to the ground and the girl steps over him, her mind unflinching. More men come in a mad scramble, but they have no swords, no bows, no mage staffs, and no magic crackles when they shout. Cole's blades meet no resistance but flesh and the crunch of bone. The men crumple and bleed, they curl in on themselves when they hit the floor like bits of parchment tossed on a campfire. They gurgle and gasp and Cole hears their thoughts as they die, and it's always the same thing: surprise.

For most of them, their first brush with consequences is a young man in leathers and a floppy hat who shoves a dagger between their ribs.

Most of them are still trying to understand what's happening when the blade reaches their heart.

The girl follows Cole like a silent shadow, eyes hard and spirit harder as she sees the others fall. Cole is not human, has never been human, has long stopped pretending to be human even though it aches at Varric like an old wound, but he knows that taking a child with him on this path of violence is not what he's supposed to do. *It's not how a person would do it*, he said once, but Cole has seen a lot of people, and sometimes, he thinks they forget just how much darkness children understand.

Later, if she wants, he'll help her to forget. He'll wander through the choked garden of her mind, search for the rotting corpse at the centre that's poisoning the ground, take it away so the water washes clean and the flowers can grow, the trees grow tall and green and strong. But right now — for now doesn't want to forget. For now she wants to fight.

A sound Cole doesn't understand, too loud and sharp for anything he's heard before, like a door slamming in the middle of an empty chamber and echoing against the walls. He wants to ask someone — what is it, what makes that sound, how does it happen, why is it so loud — but then the pain hits, hard, and leaves him gasping. Cole staggers back, stares down at the blood spreading across his shoulder. He blinks. It's hard to breathe. The man down the hall has something in his hands. It's black and ordinary and much too small to hurt like that.

And then — all sound stops.

It doesn't fade, doesn't falter, it just ... stops.

Everything rushes loud, then goes still, as though a storm raced toward the shore but came up short against a giant wall of glass. The men in the hallway freeze, their eyes wide, arms shaking. The man called *papa* with the white hair, his stare cold, cutting, calculating like Seeker Lambert, the kind of man who looks at people and sees numbers, obstacles, disappointments, takes one stuttered step, stilted, stumbling, before he sticks in place.

Eleven steps forward. She jerks her head to the side, sharp, striking, like a dragon with its prey. One man falls, his head at odd angles from his body. The roaring in Cole's ears grows louder. For the first time since crossing over he hears the song, faint but focused, the shiver of a finger trailing across his shoulder blades before it dances back to her.

Well, shit, says the Varric in his head.

An apostate, says Cassandra. *Of course.*

Now, Seeker, says Solas. *There are no Circles here, no training for her to reject. Technically, that would make her a hedge mage.*

Who cares what she's called? says the Iron Bull. *She's fuckin' badass! And, you know, terrifying.*

He shouldn't be surprised. A world without magic and what do they do when they find some? They take the little hedge mage and lock her away, do their best to turn her into a monster, then punish her for becoming what they made her. Some things never change.

Another soldier falls, then another, and another. Soon it's just her papa and a stern-faced woman, holding one of those strange black weapons and staring with eyes that burn cold like veilfire. But Eleven is tiring, teetering, the aftermath of too much magic pressing down even as she fights to keep moving. Cole has seen this before, the Inquisitor pushing forward after sealing too many rifts, drinking healing potions instead of heading back to camp to keep from collapsing even as the warning burn of exhaustion starts behind their eyes.

Cole is bleeding, still struggling to pull air into his lungs. *You aren't human,* Cole reminds himself. He made his body, gave it form and substance, and while he can die and can be killed like any spirit brought into being on this side of the Fade, for a short time he can trick himself into thinking he can't. He focuses on the light inside him, faraway and fleeting, finds the distant flicker of the Fade and fans it to a flame.

The pain fades, at least for now, and Cole appears beside Eleven as

the last of her strength gives out. He catches her before she collapses, lifts her in his arms and braces her weight against his shoulder.

The man and the woman still stare at him, trapped and trembling. He feels their anger, mingled with shock and disbelief. *How dare you, they think. Who are you?*

He'll have to ask Varric for a smooth line he could have said.

"You don't get to hurt her anymore," Cole says instead. "You're not going to hurt anyone anymore."

Cole has two daggers and one arm free. It's more than enough.

He follows the song back to the rift. It's faint, fading, but he finds it, sees Skyhold on the other side, firm and familiar. But Rhys taught him that he always has to ask, and so Cole kneels, slides Eleven down and braces her against his side, and tugs at her thoughts until she slips from sleep. She blinks at him, brows furrowed, frowning, eyelids heavy like a falling quilt.

"I'm going home now," Cole says. "I can take you with me. I have friends, friends like you. Friends with numbers instead of names, who gave themselves new names and chose to make a life instead of follow orders. Friends with magic just like yours, who all their lives were made to feel guilty and ashamed, who learned not to be afraid of who they are. They could help you."

She stares at him, her face and mind a wall of blank incomprehension. It's too much too fast and Cole understands, the world is too big and too wide and when all you understand is pain and hurt and darkness, help and freedom and choice and agency are big concepts. He doesn't have the words. The others can help with that part, but not yet, that's later.

"My friends and I," Cole says, trying again. "We knew pain, and hurt, but now it's over. Now we're getting better. It's not all better, not yet. They still have nightmares. Cassandra still thinks she failed. Sera still doesn't like raisins, and Blackwall doesn't know which name to use. I sit by the Inquisitor's bed at night when they can't see me and I talk to their hand so they can fall asleep."

Eleven's mind buzzes, not with questions but confusion. Cole shakes his head. This isn't working, and he can't make her forget and start again. "I'm sorry, I'm not used to — I mean, things get better. I can show you what it's like, the things we do to help it get better. We laugh, and we play cards, and we walk barefoot in the gardens, and — and we eat soup. Or, well, I don't, but they do, and they seem to like it. And cookies."

Eleven's frown deepens, but this time her mind turns over each new word. "Cards? Gardens?" She tilts her head. "Cookies?"

"Yes," Cole says. "Don't let Sera discourage you, lots of people say they're delicious. Or they can be, if you don't use raisins. Will you come with me?"

Eleven stands, steadies herself, studies the rift. She looks up at Cole, blood smeared across her face from where she wiped her nose. "Yes," she says. She looks up at him, the man with the bloody daggers who appeared in her room and killed the men who hurt her, and smiles. It's a small smile, a little twitch of lips, but it's like a burst of sun from behind the clouds, catching that ripple of light from what remains of the Breach in the sky.

Cole holds out his hand. Eleven takes it, and together they walk through the rift back home.